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The 'Auto Cannibal'

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I primarily consider art as a means of understanding the world and my practice is based on personal observations and autonomous processes. This can often lead to an over-analysis of the mundane, which is directly confronted in each of my projects through an enthusiasm for the objects we not only take for granted, but do so to the extent that we barely notice their existence. I engage in experiments which attempt to re-imagine their potential and a series of personal journeys ensue which results in work that questions the nature of art itself and exists outside the traditional constraints of typical art media which like the objects I investigate, can also be taken for granted.

Many artists and critics challenge the definition of art and the role of an artist remains in constant debate. In an interview for the BBC's *Culture Show*, Martin Creed (2010), dismissed referring to himself as an *artist* because he "doesn't know what art is" and his work is merely just "things [he] has made". When an artist such as Creed is unable to quantify the very subject of which he is a major figure, then it seems necessary to re-evaluate our own definition of this increasingly loose term. Josef Kosuth, in 1969 has also proposed that the primary concern for artists should be to question the very nature of art itself and this analysis would be hindered by remaining within its traditional categories. Artists should, as a result disregard such anachronistic traditions; consider them useless and even detrimental. Essentially, it was suggested that the concept should become a machine which makes the art (Alberro, 1999).

The relentless triumph of technology is increasingly dismissive of the human desire for interaction; we are deprived of experiences with the ordinary and become less aware of the potential such objects contain. This disquiet is not uncommon and has been addressed as early as the 1800s by the Luddites, a social movement of British textile artisans who organised acts of sabotage in opposition to the Industrial Revolution (Sale, 1996). Drawing inspiration from literature, philosophy and ideas which surround permanence in a society which is frequently considered *throwaway*, I am influenced by personal insecurities and have developed a creative style that not only explores construction - in the obsessive means by which a work is made; but celebrates the process of destruction - in that the materials I use have the potential to consume themselves in a process I generally liken to that of the *auto cannibal*.

Artists who have explored similar concepts include Gustav Metzger in late 1950s under the genus *Auto-Destructive Art*; Jean Tinguely with work such as *Homage to New York*, 1960 and the conceptual artist, John Baldessari in his *Cremation Project* of 1970. Baldessari burned all of his

paintings dated between May 1953 and March 1966 in, as Leslie Jones (2010) puts it, a public renunciation of painting and to mark the beginning of a more documentary, hands-off approach to art making where photography was used to record acts and events. Michael Landy developed this notion further in 2001 over a two-week period at a vacant C&A store in Oxford Street, London with *Break Down*, a work in which he employed the forces and processes of destruction to reveal those of creation (Sillars, 2009). In *Break Down*, Landy and his team of operatives systematically dismantled all 7,227 of his possessions before passing them along a specially built conveyor-belt based assembly line into the path of an industrial shredder.

In 2009, I collaborated with Glyndwr University MA Fine Art student, Leigh Williams in a venture entitled *projectproject*. Influenced by Ralph Rugoff's notion of the *forensic aesthetic* (1996) which explores the concept of the viewer in a gallery environment as forensic investigator whereby the art raises the 'seven classic questions... who, what, where, with what, why, how and when'. Additional concerns in *projectproject* explored the idea of an *action* equaling an *event*, this resulted in the use of makeshift throwing devices, often playfully fabricated from dismantled chairs to propel a number of familiar objects, *plucked* from their original contexts, across a gallery space. The objects involved with the project seldom contained any relation to each other, however once airborne, interactions began to occur for a miniscule period of time and the once separate items interacted to resemble a single object. A series of sculptural *high-speed assemblages* were documented using photography and became poignant as moments in time that will never happen again.

The aftermath of the event became significant to *projectproject* as its haunting calmness contradicted the anarchic process which had preceded it. When invited to exhibit *projectproject* after Leigh Williams' nomination for Axis' *MAstars* proved successful, the viewers were presented with a conundrum in the form of a mysterious upturned chair with bungee cords attached and a pile of debris. A procedure described by Rugoff (1996) as 'mental reconstruction' commences as the viewers forensically scrutinise the installation as if it were a crime scene in an attempt to understand the work and consequently, their own motives for being there. According to Honor Pedican (2009), *MAstar* nominator from the Wrexham Art Centre, visitors to *projectproject* were even reminded of the recent suicide bomber phenomenon when observing the chaotic arrangement of items on the floor.

The concept of using destructive methods to remove the emphasis of an *art object* was developed in *Pyromaniac Shack*, 2009. A model house was painstakingly assembled from matches and later destroyed, by the very nature of it's own contradicted existence. The ambiguities did not cease in the aesthetics of the piece as when reviewing the video, the ambience of people attending to their daily business while this event was taking place forced the work to operate on a tender but

idiosyncratic platform. In addition to the cracking and popping as the object violently cannibalised itself, we can also hear the passing of cars on an adjacent road, the frantic whirring of a washing machine on spin cycle, the hustle and bustle of locals shouting in the street and even the flash of an onlooker's camera appears. All of these provide a significant contradiction to the work – life continuing normally as death is taking place. Not only the death of an artwork, the death of an idea which produced it. *Pyromaniac Shack* became fundamental in questioning the permanence of our ideas and introduced the notion that once an idea has been satisfied in realising an artwork, it essentially dies as the work begins a visceral journey inside the imaginations of those who experience it.

Transient and event based work characteristically emphasises the importance of documentary methods and in *Pyromaniac Shack*, film was used for the first time in addition to the almost self-parodied digital photography from *projectproject*. The photographs illustrate the object in great detail during various parts of the destructive process but failed to display its energy due to their robustness. Film provides a unique opportunity to refer back and scrutinise each frame with intense fervour by speeding up, slowing down or making still images, the lattermost, a discovery which emerged some time after *Pyromaniac Shack* was filmed, through an interest in the work of Peter Fischli & David Weiss, in examples such as *The Way Things Go*, 1987 (Soentgen, 2005) and Roman Signer who affirms the idea that 'films and explosions are synonymous' (Mack, 2006). From my own experience I have learned by using both, film and photography, in contrast to digital photographs, film-stills more accurately portray the violence and ferocity of an explosion or similar event. From the viewer's perspective, the use of still images captured directly from a film provide a unique opportunity that they can be seen in any order, speed and direction when displayed in a formal gallery situation. A film of a transient event, on the other hand, not least in my recent work, which may remain for seconds can only be *watched* in the way to which the artist confines them.

When confronted with every day objects, we make assumptions based on their function; however, an individual such as an artist confronts the same object from a perspective which, as philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer explained when likening the 'artistic genius' to a 'saint', "supposedly contemplates reality from a standpoint which transcends ordinary empirical understanding" (Janaway, 1994). In my current body of work, the *IAC (Incandescent Auto Cannibal)* series, a Frankensteinian investigation concerned with pulling apart systems and aspirations has taken place. Light bulbs, arguably the most common of *common objects* have been explored with meticulous scrutiny through a series of joyful, yet sophisticated experiments. The initial research involved with this project became convoluted and presented the possibility of shifting the project entirely into the realms of science rather than the boundary of art and science, on which it was comfortably placed. Dylan Roelofs exploits the same systems in his work by creating hand-blown incandescent glass sculptures, lamps, lights and bulbs, however, my personal interest in force,

motion and velocity would not be satisfied by creating work which behaved in a similar, sustained way and it became clear that the tungsten filament provided the basis of releasing the energetic potential of the bulb and that stripping a light bulb of the iconic glass casing renders it less light bulb like and more of a sophisticated auto-destructive machine.

The environment contained within a regular incandescent light bulb is essentially a highly sophisticated life-support system which prevents the tungsten filament from reacting with oxygen, catching fire and dissolving prematurely. Although my experiments are ongoing, a fascination with the explosive force of an exposed filament has culminated in a series of tungsten wire pieces which have been secured within the support wires of a what had once been a fully functional light bulb. The explosive force (of the filament) is as Roman Signer, a particularly strong influence in my work explains, a sculpture in it's own right (Mack, 2006). Furthermore, through creating *IAC250810fs*, a series of film stills which illustrate a tungsten wire dissolving, questions regarding the various methods of activating an electrical switch were raised, from which I discovered that using digital timers would amplify the aforementioned sculptural tension while discretely contesting the necessity of an art object. The use of light bulbs might even remind the viewer of childhood television cartoons such as the development of an often-mischievous idea is highlighted by the appearance of a light bulb above a character – a literal testament to the playfulness of my experiments.

An additional interest in my work is based on life and death, which has become a recurring theme through each of the projects I have been involved with. These aspects of our existence are typically the only traits we all share and the thought that eventually, everything we know will abruptly cease to exist is a fear which I attempt to rationalise through the making and unmaking of artwork. With consideration to the *IAC* series of work, these can be observed as a lighthearted acknowledgement of our own transience in the celebratory way in which the objects explode into the territory of nothingness. An additional contradiction exists in the notion that the work could be re-made with all timers reset at artist's discretion in a similar way to the production line in a factory. In *IAC0910*, digital timers are utilised to initiate the destructive process of an object, an action which was once literally as simple as *flicking a switch*. The digital timer, however, is the means of delaying this particular process, thus, through *IAC0910* in particular, the present advances in technology can be rendered potentially dangerous. In essence, while the work seemingly embraces technology, the manner in which it is used to destroy itself remains influenced through the anxieties I share with those of the Luddites.

It would not be feasible to consider *IAC0910* as the conclusion of a body of work, but rather a point currently reached in my seemingly aimless experiments. *IAC0910* will soon revert to a less hierarchical status of an exhibited work of art and become preparatory work from which further

questions will emerge. These questions will be explored in the future and may or may not evaluate the same materials; the conceptual framework, however, will remain highly influential.

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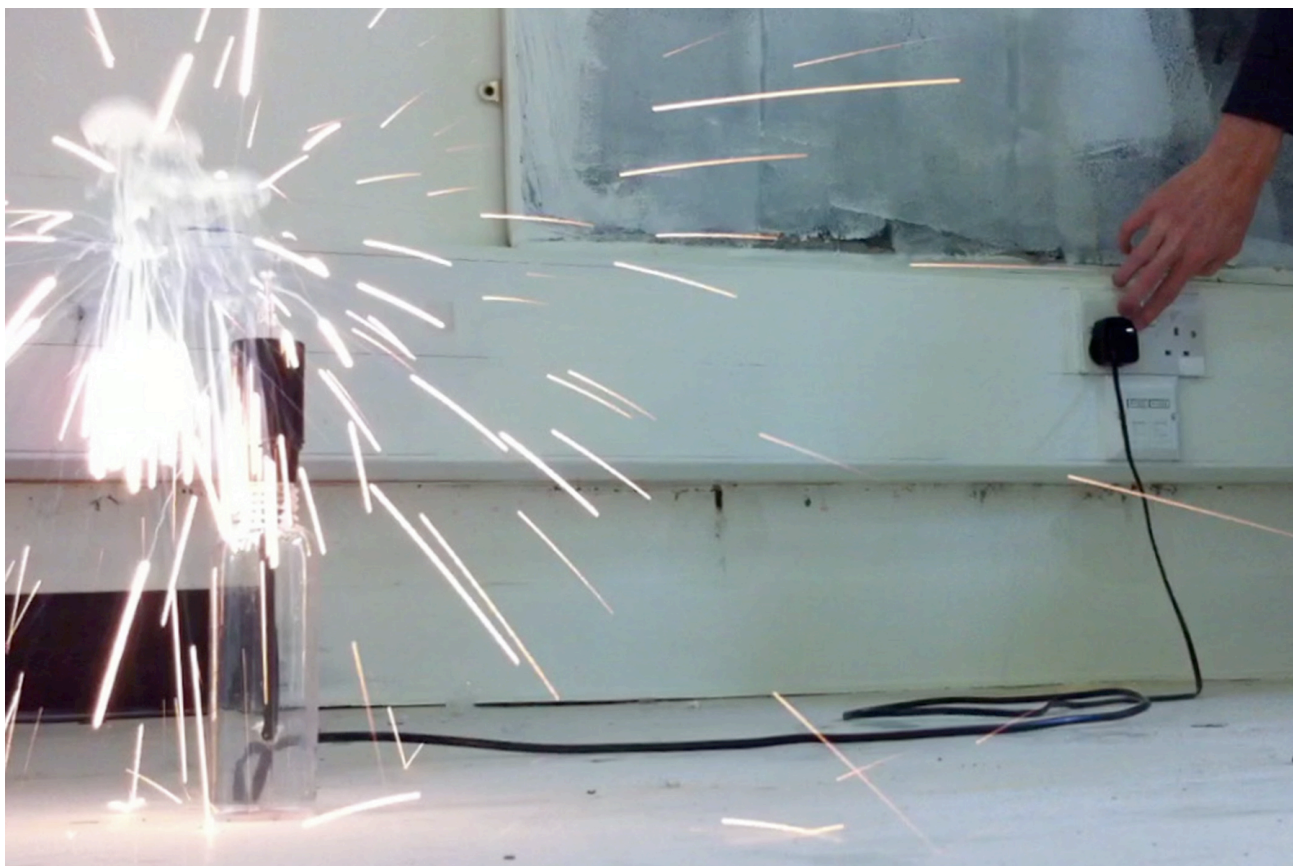


projectproject, 2009

Collaboration with Leigh Williams



Pyromaniac Shack, 2009



IAC250810fs, 2010

Incandescent Auto Cannibal Project, 2010

